

Murder, magic and El-words by OrangeLovePerson

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Summary: Autumn, 1985: Instead of another D&D Friday at Mike's, Max decides to host a murder mystery party this weekend. Everyone's dressing up and trying to get into character for the game, while Dustin has to navigate through some problems of his own, and while Mike is looking for the right opportunity to tell Eleven something pretty important. Fluff, mostly.

1. Chapter 1

A.N.: Hi everyone, I decided to write a tiny D&D adventure for our favourite weirdos, minus the actual D&D. There'll be 3 or 4 chapters in total, this one is kind of a prologue, and I hope you won't be annoyed at me for the rather slow pace of the story. As always, thank you so much for reading and I hope you have a lovely weekend. :)

Autumn, 1985

Okay, so here's the thing:

Talking to girls isn't easy.

It's not easy when your hair looks fantastic, or when your cool new friend has talked an almost unreal amount of confidence into you. And not even when your brand-new teeth are blazing in disco-lights and you're tucked into a fancy suit and surrounded by them, will it ever be easy to talk to girls.

But.

Science is easy. Math and biology and physics. At least at the level they're at in school right now, this stuff comes easy to Dustin Henderson.

And it's finally going to pay off.

„No way!”, Lucas exclaims, as he's almost choking on a piece of broccoli-pizza. „No way did Mona McConnor ask you to be her tutor!”

Dustin decides to play it cool, as he takes a bite from his own lunch.
„Believe it or not, it happened!”

(Okay, maybe he's not really playing it all that cool, with that uncontrollably wide grin of his, but whatever.)

„No. Freaking. Way.”, Lucas repeats, shaking his head.

Will smiles, looking happy for his friend, while Mike is still busy

explaining the word „asparagus” to El, who just discovered that yes, there are in fact vegetables far more disgusting than mushy peas out there in this world.

Max, on the other hand, is crossing her arms in front of her chest, annoyedly.

„So what? It's just Mona McConnor, not the freaking Mona Lisa, or something.”

Dustin shrugs. „Yes, but *this* Mona is an actual person.”

„A person that smells like cat hair most of the time, Dustin.”, Max scoffs, rolling her eyes.

„Seriously?”, he asks, perhaps sounding a little too eager for such a question, but if Mona happened to have a cat, his mom would definitely like her!

„Urgh, gross.”, his red-haired friend comments, still looking annoyed.

„I think Mona's nice.”, is what Will has to say, who used to sit next to her in arts class, last year, if Dustin remembers correctly.

„And she looks good.”, Lucas adds, before quickly focusing on his plate again and dodging the invisible bullets coming from Max' eyes.

„Who looks good?”, El asks, who is now, that the most bizzare veggies are finally gone from her meal, paying attention again.

„A girl whose tutor Dustin will be soon.”, Will says, smiling. „But Max doesn't like her very much.”

„No, I just don't like having this conversation very much.”, Max states, digging into the last bit of her vanilla pudding. „And now, if you'll excuse me, I have a history homework to finish.”

„A bit late, isn't it?”, Mike grins. „Don't you have history in like ten minutes?”

„Shut up Wheeler.”, she replies, and makes her way out of the cafeteria, tablet in hand.

„Well, that was weird.”, Dustin says, eyebrows raised.

„What, Max finishing her homework a little late?”, Lucas snorts,
„That's not weird, believe me.”

„Nah, I meant that whole „Mona McConnor smells like cat hair” part.
That's not true, right Will?”

„Er, I don't know.”, Will answers, surprised at the question.

„Well, you probably smell like demodog half of the time, Dustin, so
what's the big deal?”, Mike jokes, chuckling. Eleven starts giggling
too, next to him. These two are like lemmings, these days.

„Max is right: Shut up, Wheeler.”

Mike is carrying El's bag as they walk to class. Not to his class, to
hers. It's strange that he wants to carry things for her so often, but it's
even stranger that he still feels the need to follow her to almost every
place she goes to in this school.

Eleven loves it. She used to think he was scared of her messing
something up, talking to a teacher in a weird way or accidentally
revealing her powers when none of her friends are around, to cover it
up somehow. But then El noticed how Mike isn't really surprised
when she gets things right, either, always looking at her with so
much faith in his eyes and smiling the nicest smiles at her.

So now Eleven thinks that he just *likes* to follow her through school,
and that's quite convenient, because she likes to have him around,
too. She often wonders how Mike and the others are not much more
popular than they are. Who wouldn't want to be friends with them?
High schools really do have a lot of mouthbreathers inside, it seems.

But there's also nice people. Like Susan, from El's English class, or
Benji, who El has PE with. But no one's ever as nice as Mike, of
course. She likes him like no one else, and that's a weird feeling,
because usually these likings don't seem to be as strong, with people
their age. El noticed how other people in their grade held hands, a
couple weeks or months ago, and how they have already stopped

doing so again. And her soaps, the ones she used to watch so much when she still spend all her days in the cabin... They always just have adults in them, when it comes to *love*.

It's a big word, isn't it? Everyone acts like it's the biggest word of all, *love*, but El wants to use it so badly, sometimes. And not just applied to Eggos or board games she can't get enough of. No, she wants to say it about Mike.

But maybe it won't mean as much if she says it *now*.

Now, while everyone holds hands and stops again, and while some movies are still too scary or some drinks are still dangerous for them. There's so much stuff she isn't allowed to do yet, and El doesn't really care for the most part. But if that word, the *love* thing, is also forbidden somehow, then maybe Eleven would like to break this one rule.

Because Mike wants to walk her to class, and he smiles when he explains tricky words to her. And Eggos are yummier with him around, and things make sense when he says them.

„Hey, you okay?”, he asks, looking concerned for a moment as they stop in their tracks, a couple feet away from her history classroom. El smiles and takes her bag from him, her right hand still in his. He looks relieved, blushing a little and pressing her hand slightly.

„So, um... I'll go then, yeah?”

She nods, waiting for him to let go of her, a little amused when he still hasn't, half a minute later. He just looks down at their intertwined fingers, deep in thought, it seems.

„Oh, look, who's here! Frogface and his little girlfriend, that's nice.”, a loud, twanging voice says behind them, and they both turn around.

While James and Troy, two of the first mouthbreathers El has ever met (in the outside world, at least), have recognized her quickly after her arrival in school this summer, not *all* of the mouthbreathers know how dangerous she can be. Maybe Troy and James tried to tell people about what El can do, but no one believed them? Or maybe, they

were clever enough to keep this fact secret, staying away from Jane Hopper and all her „nerdy friends”, for the most part.

George Huffington, a bulky, pale kid with stringy blond hair and the most evil eyes on the planet, probably, *does not* stay away, for the most part.

„What do you want, George?”, Mike says, chancing a cold glance at the other kid, and looking like he’s inwardly arming himself.

But Mike doesn’t have to, and George’s nasty smirk quickly disappears, as Mr. Fitch crosses the corridor. He’s the school’s janitor, and while he might not have quite the same authority as a teacher, Mr. Fitch is „scary as hell”, as Dustin likes to put it. He’s got these really low eyebrows that always make him seem like he’s angry, and his death stares look very deadly indeed.

Mr. Fitch eyes them up and down, before pulling out a small plastic bottle and applying oil to every locker’s door hinge, one by one. George looks pretty annoyed at this, but not even he is stupid enough to cause a fight right under an adult’s nose. So he just casts another dark glance in their direction, before walking past them. And Mike? Mike turns around to El, his eyes still a little agitated. She takes his hand again, and he looks back down at their clasping fingers. Highschools are full of mouthbreathers, indeed. It’s so good to have a Mike around.

She pecks him goodbye before he leaves, and he seems to melt just a bit.

She wants to tell Mike that one word again, but maybe today’s not the day for that. Maybe it’s just an adult-thing, anyway.

Whatever it is, El can wait.

Eleven is smiling at Max, when she enters the room and drops down in her seat. Max can see it from the corner of her eye, but is too busy finishing her homework to look up.

So El waits, looking like she has something important to say,

something that deserves Max' full attention, but that also can't wait till after class.

When Max lowers her pen and closes it, she turns towards her friend and grins.

„Hey, El.“

„Hi.“, Eleven replies, her tiny smile spreading a little wider.

„What's up?“, the redhead asks, encouraging El to finally tell her whatever she wants to tell her.

Eleven looks down at her school bag – a light blue back pack formerly used by Hopper to store first aid supplies in, as Max has been told before,- and she pulls out a book. A very familiar book.

„I'm done.“, El says, contentedly, and Max beams.

„You finished it?“

Eleven nods.

„And? Did you like it?“

Eleven nods again. „It's really good.“, she states, looking serious.

„I know, right?“, the redhead exclaims, excited to hear so.

Murder on the Orient Express must be the coolest book she's ever had to read for school, back in California, and when Max saw El sitting around with one of those terribly long *Lord of the Rings* books the boys were so into, a couple weeks ago, she couldn't help but to interfere, borrowing her this one instead. Baby steps, and stuff.

„Were you surprised at the end?“, Max wants to know, right as Mr. Gordon, their teacher, enters the room, the school bell ringing loudly.

„Yes.“, El states, her eyes wide. „I thought the detective was the murderer.“

„What?“, Max snorts, smirking. „Really?“

„He was... confusing the others.“, Eleven argues, furrowing her eyebrows.

„Yes, but only because they weren't really good at solving crimes, and he was always a step ahead of them. Right?“

El nods, smiling again as the last of their classmates sit down and get their books out, around them.

„I liked it.“, she says again, and then Mr. Gordon starts talking about the Civil War, while drawing a complicated diagram on the board. But Max' mind is elsewhere.

She thinks about last November, when she'd first met Eleven and became a part of this entire, weird world El and the boys had been living in for a year, already. One with monsters and alternate dimensions, and all that.

And then Max wonders what it was like for the Chief and Will's mom, when they were looking for clues on their own, also trying to figure out what had happened to Will. Everyone had been part of some sort of investigation, slowly coming to terms with just how insane their situation really was. Max sometimes feels sad for having missed all of that. It makes her feel... excluded, somehow, even now that things with Mike are okay again and that El is super fond of her. Everyone likes Max, and of course she feels like a part of this entire thing, now. A real member of the party.

But that doesn't mean Max doesn't wonder sometimes what it could have been like, being there right from the scary start.

Max shakes her head, pulling herself out of the awkward thoughts and trying to focus on her class again.

The last thing she needs are problems in school.

It's eight 'o'clock when the walkie sizzles. Max has spend most of today's afternoon re-reading her Agatha Christie book, now that she just got it back from El.

It's been a while since she last read it, and thoughts of Max' former

favourite teacher from California are lingering between the pages. This book might be pretty old, but it's still not so bad, Max thinks. She puts it away when Wheeler's voice drowns from her night stand.

„Guys? This is Mike, are you there? Over.”

„Hey Mike, Dustin here. Over.”, says another familiar voice, a moment later.

Max picks the device up and pushes the button. „Yeah, me too.”

„Max, you have to say 'Over', when you're done. Over.”, Mike reminds her, not for the first time. She rolls her eyes at him.

„Guys? Hello, are you there? Over.”, Will asks, his voice a little muffled and barely understandable from the distance.

„Yes.”, El answers, and suddenly the rustling in their connection becomes far less obvious, her voice clear and precise.

„Oh, perfect, thanks El! Over.”, says a well-audible Mike, before clearing his throat. And of course, he doesn't remind *her* on finishing all sentences with that stupid 'Over.', Max notices with a smirk, but whatever.

„So, uhm, I'm sorry guys, but I think I might need another week for the campaign. It's nowhere near ready yet, and I still have a bunch of other stuff to do until Friday, so...”

„What kind of other stuff?”, Dustin wants to know, sounding confused. „Over.”

Mike sighs. „Well, if you need to know, Coach Nielson is making me write a 1000-word essay on *team-spirit* for Thursday. And anyway, this campaign is a total mess right now, I need another week to work on it. Over.”

Then, he adds: „Hey, where's Lucas, by the way?”

„I think he's helping his neighbour in his garden again?”, Will answers, uncertain.

„Don't try to change the subject, Wheeler!”, Max grins, still caught up on something else.

„Yeah, why don't you tell us how the hell you got yourself into writing an essay about team-spirit for Coach Nielson?”, Dustin comments, amusedly, „We're in the same class and I didn't even notice that!”

Another annoyed sigh. „So, apparently I was „trying to lose at dodge ball on purpose” in order to sit on the bench for the rest of the lesson. But that's not even true, okay? I just suck at dodge ball, it's such a stupid game!”, Mike complains, while Dustin cackles.

„Okay, but you have to admit that it kind of makes sense for him to assume..-”

„Shut up.”, Mike replies, exasperatedly. „Over.”

„So, are we going to the arcade then, on Friday?”, Dustin offers, once his laughter dies down. „I'm not really that packed with cash at the moment, though, guys. Over.”, he warns, and Max silently agrees. Will probably does, too.

„How about we watch a movie at my place?”, Will suggests. „Over.”

„Which movie?”, Mike asks, contemplating this.

Right then, Max' eyes fall over to her novel, the yellowish paper decorated by a green bookmark, the story still fixed in her head even after so much time. And suddenly, Max gets an idea.

„Hey guys?”, she says, still unsure whether this will actually work, or not... But it's only Monday, and maybe this could be awesome...

„This is weird, but would it be okay if I tried to get a campaign ready for Friday, just this once?”

Silence. Complete, gobsmacked silence.

Then, Dustin answers. „Oh, ha ha. Very funny, Max.”

„No, I'm being serious here!”, she states, annoyed that he thinks it's a

joke.

„Since when do you know stuff about D&D, Max?”, Mike says, sounding almost a little snotty.

„I'm not talking about a D&D campaign, I'm talking about a *mystery* campaign. You know, with crime, and stuff. Ever heard of that?”

„Not really, what did you have in mind?”, Will replies, sounding curious. That kid is far too nice for this party, sometimes.

„Well, it's basically just some game where everyone dresses up and gets a character discription, and stuff. A bit like with Dungeons and Drangons, but it would probably be more fun without pen and paper, I think. We just show up in custumes and so on, and then, during the course of the evening, a few things happen and we might have to solve a crime.”, Max shrugs, rolling her eyes. „But we don't have to do that, if you freaks are so convinced I couldn't pull that off, or whatever.”

„I think it sounds cool.”, El says, shyly, and Max annoyance drops off a little. „Like in *Murder on the Orient Express*?“

Max laughs. „Yeah, a bit like that, but I'd probably think of our own plot instead. One we don't already know, El.“

„We should definitely do that!”, Mike proclaims, excitedly. *Oh sure*, now that El's on board...

„Let's give it a try.”, Will agrees, sounding contented, and even Dustin offers an agreeing hum.

„Sure, okay. Over.”

„Really?”, Max says, starting to feel excited for this brand-new plan of hers, and even moreso at the fact that the others actually like it. „Okay, um, then I'll start to think of a story, and stuff. See you all tomorrow, yeah?“

Max puts the walkie back on her night stand, taking a deep breath while the others are still saying goodbye. She can't help but to grin. She has a lot of work to do, and it might be the nerdiest she's ever

behaved, but this could actually be fun...

El is still laying in bed with her walkie, an excited feeling in her stomach and lots of questions about this new game in her head. But that all quickly becomes marginal, when her walkie buzzes, yet again.

„El? Are you still there? Over.", Mike says, his voice sounding muffled and distant again, until El focuses on it...

She also tries to isolate their frequency, making it less likely for the others to overhear them. Sometimes, El just wants Mike all to herself.

„Yes?", she replies, speaking raspily and with a smile on her lips.

„Oh, um, hey... I just, um, I just wanted to say goodnight."

„Goodnight Mike.", she replies, hoping that isn't all that he had on his mind.

„Er, so, what are you doing right now?", he asks, somehow sounding embarrassed. Mike can be strange, sometimes.

„I'm talking to you.", she replies, smiling. „And you?"

He chuckles. „Me too. I mean, I'm talking to *you*. Not to myself, that would be weird..."

„Mike?", she interrupts him, before he can get into another one of his ramble fits. He seems extra-nervous, at the moment, but El isn't sure why.

„Yes, El?"

„I was trying to do one of Nancy's chemistry exercises, but I'm not sure if it's right... -"

„Do you want me to come over and help you?", he offers, eagerly.

„No, wait, it's already dark outside, my mom wouldn't like that... Maybe you can show me tomorrow at lunch what you mean? And then we can figure it out together?"

El feels her lips twitch, happily. „Okay.”

It sounds like he's smiling, too. „Cool...”

It's quiet for a moment, and she waits for Mike to say something else. Eleven knows that he's thinking hard, maybe trying to find the right words for something, but there's only the sound of his breathing and that of her quiet heartbeat. And then, he sighs.

„Okay, I think I'll start with that essay I was talking about, then... Um, goodnight, El.”

„Mike?”, she says, fidgeting with her sleeve.

„Yes?”

„You're right.”

„Huh?”

„Dodge ball is stupid.”, she states, hoping he feels a little better now, maybe.

A second later, he laughs. „Oh. Oh! Yes, I mean, it sucks, right? I'm just not good at it.”, he admits. „I'm kind of glad we're not in the same sports class, so at least you don't get to see me messing that up all the time.”

El giggles. „Mike, it's okay.”

He chuckles again, and something about the breathy sound makes El's insides flip.

„Goodnight, Mike.”, she repeats, softly, wanting to hug him through the walkie, if that was possible.

„Night, El.”, he says again, and then: „I- .. You..- You're really cool, you know that?”

Another giant flip in Eleven's tummy. „You're really cool, too, Mike.”

„Bye, El.”

„Bye, Mike.“

She sinks into her pillows after they hang up. It always takes her a little while to calm down again, afterwards.

Tuesday noon starts off with potatoes, spinach, noodle soup and a tiny chance of chocolate pudding, which certainly could be worse. Amazingly, that chocolate pudding part actually works out in the end, saving Dustin's day and making El quite happy, too. As well as the chemistry exercise Mike helps her with, a goofy grin on his lips when she finally solves it almost entirely on her own.

Lucas and Max share a smirk across the table, but don't say anything.

When Will finally sits, as well, once again being the last one at the table due to his confusing liking of the cafeteria's salad bar, Max reaches inside her bag and pulls an old, red binder out of its depth.

„So, as you guys now, I have a plan for Friday.“

„Yes, we heard.“, Mike nods, curious. „What, are you already done with all the planning?“

„No, but I'm already done with half of it, and I thought I might let you know. You all will have to do a lot of preparing as well, after all. Finding costumes, getting into character, I want you to take this thing seriously, alright?“

Dustin grins, looking excited. Lucas, who has been instructed about the weird plan just this morning, raises his eyebrows.

„You don't talk to any of the others at this table about the character cards I will now give to you, okay? Except for me, *I'm* the game master this time and you can ask *me* questions, if you have a problem. You talk to *me*, not to anyone else, understand?“, Max makes clear, looking particularly at El, who eyes her innocently.

Dustin laughs. „Wow, I didn't know you could be so serious about some campaign, Max... Who's the nerd now?“

Max puts a piece of potato in his glass.

„Hey, what?”, he complains, while Will snorts.

„So, you all ready?”

The boys and El nod, watching Max inquisitorily. She continues with her speech.

„So, the year is 1929, and we're in Chicago.”, the redhead starts, looking from one of her friends to the other. „You all are guests at someone's dinner party, but you'll find more about that out on each of your roll cards. And again, I expect you to stay in character for the entire evening, get it? Your costumes don't have to be perfect, but... Anyways, here you go.”

She reaches across the table and gives each of them a folded piece of paper.

The cafeteria noise fades into the background, as they all start to read.

(to be continued)

2. Chapter 2

A.N.: Hey guys! This is a little bit all over the place, I hope it's not too confusing, or anything. Have a nice week! xx

(Still) Tuesday

„Oh come on!" Lucas complaints, as soon as he gets Max alone, that day. „You made me a photographer?"

Max rolls her eyes at him, opening her locker and grabbing a notebook from inside. It's noisy enough in the corridor for them to not be overheard. She's glad that so far none of their party members has accidentally revealed anything during lunch, but then again the week is still long.

„What's so bad about that? Sounds cool to me.", Max shrugs, letting the book slip into her open backpack. „And it's necessary for the story, sort of."

„Yeah, but you could literally have made me a ninja, or something! Or a gangster!"

„You're not just some random photographer though.", she argues, closing her locker and leaning against it. „Your job sounds super creepy, actually."

Lucas grumbles, seeming to contemplate this. „Yeah, I guess..."

Then, he smirks at her. „So, can I at least have some sort of scary laugh, or something?"

Max grins. „That's up to you, Mr. Adams."

Lucas shakes his head, pretending like he's thinking really hard about something. Then he smiles, shrugging again. „Okay, okay, that's pretty neat. I'd still rather be a ninja, though."

„You should be lucky that I didn't write you a total stalker-character, or something. I could have done that, you know? Might have been

more fitting."

He laughs, his hand brushing against hers almost casually. „Hey, by the way, what kind of character does Mike play?”

Max huffs and pulls the straps of her backpack a little tighter. Somehow, those always get loose at the moment.

„Oh, just wait till Friday, you twerp. Until then, this whole stuff is basically top secret, anyway.”

For now, there's still a lot of time ahead until their game night, but Mike can't stop mulling over it. One thing that Mike has learned pretty early on in his life, after all, it to really trust his gut instinct sometimes.

He felt it when he was seven and didn't want to go on the high new slide in Hawkins' swimming pool with Lucas – And he was right, it seemed awfully fast, and Lucas was pale as a sheet afterwards.

Then, when Mike was nine and Dustin asked him to build a paper mache volcano with him, Mike knew right away that they needed to build it in Dustin's *garden*, instead of in Dustin's *bedroom* - despite Dustin assuring him over and over again that just putting a towel under their creation would be enough to keep the mess at bay (- it totally wasn't).

And Mike also trusted his gut when Will disappeared, two years ago now. No terrifyingly grumpy police chief in this world could have stopped him and the others from looking for their missing friend.

Most importantly, Mike's gut instinct is now tied to one particular person, and to this feeling of bone-deep, complete trust.

His inner compass is working again, since she came back. Fun things are really, *really* fun again, teachers and parents aren't the root of all evil, and even Zoomers are sort of cool, all of the sudden.

This particular Zoomer-made game though... Mike's gut is tied into a knot because of that game, right now.

He sighs.

„Mike?”, El asks, the handlebars of her purple bike nudging into his, as their wheels push over the leaf-covered forest ground. „Mike, what's wrong?”

He looks up, meeting her eyes. They're warm and brown and questioning, her nose a little red from the cold afternoon air. How exactly is he supposed to not make a complete fool of himself on Friday?

„It's just... it's a little crazy, this whole game thing, isn't it?”, Mike carefully states. „I mean, my card is pretty... weird.”

„Weird?”, she repeats, her eyebrows crinkling.

„Uh-huh. My card is just kind of strange, I'm..”

„Mike, *don't tell me!*”, she reminds him, looking around as if Max might be lurking in any of the bushes nearby, for some reason. Mike grins.

„You're not allowed to, Mike!”, El quietly scolds him, and her seriousness is so strange and sweet that he has to laugh out loud. She looks surprised at that, but it quickly morphes into a shy smile.

„Are you going to tell Max?”, she then asks, softly.

Mike understands what she means. He's not entirely sure what to do, either.

„No, I don't think I'll tell Max.”, he says, a little defeatedly. „She'd just be annoyed at me and probably won't give me a new character, anyway, so what's the point.”

„The point?”

„Yes, I mean, what good does it bring if I ask her for a new role card? It's just one game, after all. It's not like with D&D, where we use the same characters again all the time, and stuff. You know?”

El nods, seeming to get what he means.

„It's not that bad, actually. I just, uhm...“ He scratches his neck, feeling weird all of the sudden and wishing he wouldn't even have started talking about this. „I guess I just don't really want you to find me super weird on Friday ...you or the others...I'm probably really bad at acting, and even if I'm not it's going to be really awkward, probably, and...-“

„Mike.“, El murmurs again, and he stops, realising that they just reached the cabin.

„Yeah?“

„It's just a game.“, she explains, looking contented with this and actually kind of excited. He nods, a little sheepishly. „Yeah... It is.“

„It will be fun.“, she assures him, all confident.

He nods, reciprocating her smile, and Eleven is probably right. Even if she's not, Mike still has about one or two hours to hang out with her, before he absolutely has to go home. It's suddenly easy to just focus on that right now, when she looks at him like that... Mike's bike hits Mirkwood's floor next to hers, and her fingers are between his, a heartbeat later.

Seriously, though: *Max must be out of her mind, or something.*

„**Your name is Dr. Eddie Millers, and you used to be a dentist.**“, the first line of Will's papercard reads. „**But last year, you've become a heart-surgeon.**“

You work in a big hospital in your home town, Chicago. The hospital director, Lance Malvick, invited you to a dinner party for next Friday. You think that's cool, but also weird, because you barely know him. You don't really worry about the dinner party, though, you know that it will be a nice evening. You are a really good heart-surgeon, and people respect you.

You live alone, but you have lots of friends and almost everyone trusts you.

Secretly, though, you are often paranoid of someone breaking in to

your house, which is why you hide almost all your money in your toupee. Also, you wear a toupee. Only on special occasions, obviously."

Will laughs as he reads this, shaking his head.

„You're in your 30s, you play an instrument that you barely tell people about, and you're collecting fancy hats.”

„Fancy hats.", Will mumurs, grinning. Where would he possibly find fancy hats? Or a toupee? But Max doesn't seriously want him to wear something like that, right? Or does she?

„What did you say, Sweetie?", Will's mom asks, sticking her head through the door of his room.

„Oh, nothing.", Will answers, pointing at the paper in his hands. „I was just reading."

„I thought you kids already wrote that geography test *last week?*", she wonders, halfway stepping into the room. Her eyes are on the big paper cards in Will's hand.

„It's not for that, it's just part of this game we're playing at Max' place on Friday.", Will explains, holding the stack of paper out to her. „It's like a costume party, and we're solving a mystery, I think."

His mom looks confused. „What, for Halloween? That's a bit early, isn't it?"

He shakes his head. „No, it's more like a D&D night, just a bit different. Mike's campaign for Friday wasn't ready yet, so Max thought of this instead." He shrugs.

She smiles, reading the paper card curiously. „Hm, you boys must have had an effect on her, if she suddenly wants to plan something like this." She chuckles, reading the character description. „A heart surgeon, now that's something!"

„Hey, mom, do you think I could borrow your bathrobe for that? You know, like a doctor's overall?"

Joyce thinks about this, trying to remember what else they could use for a costume. Her bathrobe would probably work, too, but not look very convincing.

„Oh, wait!”, she exclaims, leaving Will's room and quickly searching through her wardrobe, and soon enough coming back with a giant, green plastic container in her hands. „Don't worry, sweetie, I know exactly what you could wear as a costume.”

.....

Your name - Henry McKeen.

Your job – Private investigator!

Whenever there's a crime and the police isn't in place, private investigator Henry McKeen (that's you, Wheeler!) finds a way to solve it. He is really ambitious, has a collection of human skulls, and some super old weapons that he hides everywhere, because he's not the best fighter with just his fists. Henry McKeen only kills when he feels like he has to, but sometimes he secretly enjoys it. He has a heart of gold, though. He also has a bunch of fake mustaches, and stuff, but he doesn't always wear them, don't worry. He has a dark sense of humour, and he used to be part of a jazz band years ago. (Henry McKeen is in his thirties, but you obviously don't have to totally look that, either, just for the record.) Oh, and he winks at people a lot. Like, all the time.

Reading this again actually calms Mike down quite a bit. Yes, the whole thing might probably get a bit ridiculous, but then again he's always been good at making up different voices and getting ideas for his D&D campaigns, hasn't he?

Also, the whole part with being some sort of villan is kind of cool.

At the moment, you are working undercover in a hospital. You were hired by the hospital director himself, Dr. Lance Malwick, and have been working there for several months, now. Your code-name is Henry McDeen. (Clever, I know.)

Here's the reason for this: Lately, several elderly patients have died

under strange circumstances, and while he can't prove anything, the director thinks that someone might be poisoning the patients. You „work" as one of the janitors of the building, collecting a lot of information on everyone and searching through people's stuff, at night. In order to finally confront the people you suspect to perhaps be guilty, and in order to figure out who the murderer is, the hospital director is holding that dinner party on Friday.

It's the last step of your several-month-long mission, and hopefully you can solve the crime. Your colleagues obviously won't know why they're at the dinner party, at first. Got it? Okay.

The only thing Mike doesn't like at all is what Max says lastly, on his card:

In order to make everything look less suspicious, your boss also wanted you to invite a few of the people who you believe to be definitely innocent. One of them is a nurse named Darla Jacobs, and while you were investigating in the hospital, you secretly developed a giant crush on her.

That's all you need to know, for now.

I expect big from you, Wheeler! Do your best!

And that's it, that's how Mike's instructions end. He groans inwardly, rolling around on his bed until his shoulders hit the mattress, and thinking about how totally embarrassing that last point of information could maybe turn out to be on Friday. Urgh, why can't the others sometimes just give it a rest with the teasing? Yes, Mike does spend a lot of time around El, and yes, she's definitely the coolest person ever and it's hard to act nonchalant about that, sometimes, but it's not like Mike's life is getting any easier from their behavior, oh no. It really doesn't.

Jeez, it's super annoying, actually. The constant innuendo, the mocking, the raised eyebrows and stupid grins... It's not like the others – Dustin, Lucas, Max, and sometimes even Wil,- are trying to be *mean* or anything, but now and then their comments really embarrass Mike in front of El, and sometimes she seems completely confused by this stuff, too.

And what, now he has to pretend to be... who, exactly? Some sort of spy, pretending to be a janitor; pretending to be in love with „Darla Jacobs“ (who was definitely going to be played by El); all the while pretending to not be completely crazy about *real-life* El, (as Mike usually tries when surrounded by their friends)?

Mike sits up, huffing at the thought of how he can't exactly *call* Max right now and demand an explanation. He doesn't share a special, personal walkie frequency with anyone from their party except for Eleven, and after all of Max' talk about how important secrecy was to her game, Mike doesn't want to risk any of the others overhearing them. He'll have to wait till tomorrow in school to talk to Max, it seems. Or maybe, he'll just have to get over it and play the silly character she wants him to play... Again, *urgh*.

So, given his currently frustrated mood, Mike decides to ring El, instead, for lack of anything better to do.

She won't be able to help him with his dinner party questions, but for the most part Eleven is the best distraction in the world, and that's a whole lot cooler than mystery game nights, anyway.

Wednesday

„Shit shit shit shit!“, Dustin mumbles, around five that afternoon, flipping coach pillows around and lying flat on the floor, glancing under the sofa. „Shit.“

„Maybe it's in your room, Dusty?“, his mom offers, „Or in the bathroom?“

„No, mom.“, he replies, absent-mindedly, and casts his eyes through the room again, sitting up. „It's got to be here!“

„I can give you another quarter, sweetie.“, Mrs. Henderson comments, still from her spot in the armchair. Dottie, their youngest cat, is meowing in her lap and looking pretty cozy.

Dustin sighs. „It's not about some random quarter, mom. I have to find *this* one! It only ever works with this one!“

„Hmm.“, his mother answers, sounding at least a *little* bit sympathetic. (She's a good woman, Claudia Henderson, even if her attention is sometimes on the wrong stuff.) „That's too bad.“ Then, her eyes find the clock for a moment, despite her favorite TV-drama currently playing. „Hey, Dusty, didn't you say your friend Steve wants to meet you later?“

„What?“, he asks, also looking at the clock, and realizing that it's already close to four. He groans.

„Okay, I've got to go, but if you find my blue coin, keep it save somewhere, can you?“

He jumps up and runs into his room, grabbing his backpack from the unmade bed, opening and closing it one more time to see if he brought enough snacks for the afternoon. There's a few Snickers bars, chocolate cookies and a bag of cheese balls inside, making Dustin's face light up in a satisfied beam. He has all he needs. Dustin hates being unprepared when it comes to snacks. Also, Steve barely ever has chips and such stuff at his place, - he's probably too worried about his flawless skin, or something,- so it's especially important for Dustin to be prepared.

He is out of the door and on his bike a moment later, after giving his mom a little peck on the cheek and another reminder to keep looking for his special coin. But she's probably not going to look for it, he realizes with a sigh. Apart from the sort of soap-opera that even El would probably find weird, his mom is mostly focused on her new knitting project, at the moment. It's a bright green patchwork blanket of about the size of their bathtub. (It definitely seems more effective than all the oven cloths she used to make, a while ago. They always caught fire, somehow.)

As he makes his way through Hawkins, Dustin wonders where he could have lost the special, blue painted coin, and if it might still be at Will's, or something... but that seems weird, he didn't *show* his friends the trick yet, after all. When Lucas, Will and he had been studying at the Byers' place, yesterday, Dustin had felt the coin in his pants pocket, and he was almost a hundred percent certain that it had *still* been there when he'd come home again, afterwards.

Why is this one coin so special, you ask? Well, because Dustin takes his job seriously, alright? And what kind of awesome show magician would he be if he couldn't even present some simple coin tricks to his audience? Or a few basic card tricks? It took Dustin almost three hours to learn what little he knows about magic tricks. But it took him also quite long to convince Miss Hubert, the librarian, to even let him borrow so many books about this stuff in the first place. So there's quite a lot at stake here.

„Hey, man.“, Steve greets him, as he opens the front door. He's drinking soda out of a metal can, which are for some reason always present in the Harringtons' fridge. Sometimes, the two of them put different types of bubblegum or fizzy tablets inside the cans, after making bets about which combination will explode the most. But now it's autumn and mostly quite cold outside. Instead of hanging out near Steve's pool, the two boys are rather playing video games or watching TV inside.

„Hey. I didn't by any chance leave a coin here, last time, did I?“, Dustin asks, just to be safe, as Steve closes the door behind him and waits for the younger teen to take off his shoes. Not even Steve takes off his shoes at Steve's place, but Dustin thinks it's more polite this way. Also, the Harringtons have this really fluffy carpet in their living room, and walking on it with just your socks feels like walking on a *cloud*, he swears.

„A coin?“, Steve asks, raising his eyebrows. „What, like a quarter?“

„Yes, but it's covered in blue paint and it's really smooth and even, you know? Almost like plastic.“, Dustin explains.

Steve walks over to his fridge, wordlessly offering Dustin another soda can, which he takes with a happy „*Thanks*“.

„I need it for a magic trick.“, he then states, knowing full well that Steve might find this even more nerdy than all the other stuff Dustin tells him on a daily basis. But, oh well.

Steve snorts, flopping down on his couch with a grin. „Wait, what? Like, to impress girls with, or something?“

„Huh?”, Dustin says, a frown appearing on his forehead. He didn't even think of that... „Do you mean, *girls like magic tricks?*”, Dustin asks, eagerly, his thoughts wandering to that tutoring session with Mona tomorrow...

Steve laughs, making Dustin's hopes for new flirtation techniques deflate quite quickly. But then, he seems to reconsider, his grin being replaced by a more thoughtful expression. „Uhm, I don't know, actually. What kind of 'magic trick' do you mean?”, he wonders, sipping on his drink again.

„I've got two card tricks, one coin trick,- but that only works with the coin I lost, so I have to find it again until Friday,- and I think I could pull off a cylinder trick, but unfortunately I don't have a rabbit, and our cats are too chubby for it.”

„What's Friday? Your date with that *Mona-girl?*”, Steve wants to know, curiously. After Mona asked Dustin for his help on Monday, he just *had* to call Steve and tell him about it. What little Dustin knows about girls is mostly just experience he got from Steve, after all, so he deserves to be kept informed about this stuff.

„No, that's tomorrow already...”, Dustin coughs, staring at the back of his soda can. He's definitely nervous because of tomorrow, but thinking too much about that can only make it worse, can't it?

„Nah, don't worry about it.”, Steve comments, casually, as if reading his mind. „You'll be fine, she's probably really into you already, if she asked you for two hours at once.”

„Two hours of *tutoring*, Steve. It's not exactly a date...”

„Yeah, but that's also what *Mike* says when he's hanging out with the little weirdo, isn't it?”, Steve says, smiling knowingly. „Trust me, that *Mona* is probably nuts for you.”

„You think?”, Dustin beams, a dimply grin appearing on his face.

„Sure. Why wouldn't she be into you? Don't stress about it.”

„Thanks, Steve.”, Dustin replies, hoping he'll be right about that.

„So, what is all that Houdini-stuff about then, huh?”, Steve wonders, gulping down his soda once more.

Dustin scratches his neck. „It's this game we're having at Max' place on Friday. Everyone dresses up, and stuff, and then there's some kind of mystery we have to solve.”

„What kind of mystery?”

He shrugs. „Don't know, but we all have to stay in our characters for the entire evening... Do you want to read my character card?”, he offers, curious of what Steve thinks of it.

„Sure.”, Steve smiles, looking genuinely interested now. Dustin pulls the little piece of paper from the bottom of his bag, and his older friend reaches for it.

„*Your name is Jamie Benson.*”, Steve starts to read, his eyebrows raising on his forehead. „*Magician by night, coroner and mortician by day...*”

(Still) Wednesday

Kissing El had once been an act of courage. And it totally still is, but at this point it can sometimes also be one of restraint.

Like... he really doesn't want to stop. *Ever.*

„Mike.”, she mumbles, against his warm lips, and it's close enough to a sigh to make his heartbeat quicken.

„El.”, he answers, because that's the word he keeps falling back to, the one that consumes him whenever his head is spinning from all the feelings. *Eleven.*

But it's almost eight, and Hopper could be home soon. Mike knows that he should be home in a couple minutes, anyway, and he really needs to pull back. Their foreheads are pressed together, right now, her hands in his, and it's getting colder and darker around them and that absolutely does not matter.

Just... one more time.

One more warm touch of his lips against hers, breathing the same air and noses nuzzling together in the cold darkness of Mirkwood. He could get lost in this stuff. The trees are shaking above them; scary, wooden giants lurking over their heads, but down here Mike feels safe and blissfully alone with her. His back is leaning against the bumpy bark of an oak tree, but his front is warm, with El standing so close.

When they pull apart again, Mike's eyes remain closed. El's fingertips are wandering across his cheeks, up the curves of his nose and cheekbones, to trace his freckles gently. She tugs her head under his chin, curly hair touching his shoulder, lips almost against his neck. And breathing.

„You smell like Eggos.”, he mumbles, absent-mindedly, and she really kisses his neck then, for some reason. And it's amazing.

„Thank you.”, El quietly states, making Mike chuckle.

„Hey, El?”, he says, and for a moment he thinks he's actually going to do it. Because now would be perfect, right? Perfect to tell her... what he wanted to tell her for a long time, now...

She looks at him, curiously, and maybe she wants to say something, too... Ask him something, tell him something. Now would just be a perfect moment to talk.

But the air is cold and the trees above them shake as the next wave of wind pushes them closer together, once more. And somehow his lips find hers or hers find his, and then it doesn't really matter all that much anymore what they wanted to say to each other or not say to each other.

Because *this* is perfect, too.

Thursday

„Got all your costumes ready yet, you guys?”, Max asks, as she flops down on her seat again, during lunch. There's nothing but curly and

uncurly fries on her plate, covered by *a lot* of gravy, and Will absent-mindedly wonders how in the world Max ever convinced the lunch lady to let her walk away with a tray like *that*.

„I thought we weren't supposed to talk about the game?”, Lucas frowns, skeptically, and takes a sip from his soda. Max rolls her eyes.

„Nah, you're just supposed to not talk about your *characters* with each other, stalker. You *can* talk about whether you're ready with your costumes yet or not. Which, by the way, seems to work better than I thought it would.”

She grins at El, who has consulted her about a dressing question just this morning, and Max was really pleased to see that El had already come up with a pretty good plan on how to look true to her character, tomorrow night.

„Yeah, I think I've got something that will work.”, Lucas shrugs, while stealing one of Max' many fries. She pulls her plate away before he can grab another one, a smirk on her lips.

„That's good.”, she comments, „Because I really think this could be cool tomorrow.”

She reaches into her bag pack, pulling one last stack of paper cards out of it.

„Oh, and Mike, I almost forgot. You need some additional background info still, don't you?”

He frowns, taking the cards from her while the others are curiously watching. „Huh?”

Max rolls her eyes. „Well, I just realized yesterday that your role won't make a lot of sense if you don't know a little more about the other characters than you do right now.” She looks around their Party. „Honestly, I'm kind of disappointed that you didn't notice that yourself, that's kind of a giant plot hole, after all.”

Dustin laughs. „Okay, now I really want to know what kind of character he got!”

He is still practising his favorite new coin trick under the table, the blue coin he'd finally found again yesterday quickly dancing around between his knuckles.

„Well, you'll figure it out tomorrow, alright?" Max smiles, excitedly, and dips another french frie into giant amounts of gravy sauce.

Yes, it really looks like this game of hers is turning out pretty awesome.

And maybe, Max now finally kind of understands how her friends can get so caught up in this whole Dungeons and Drangons thing so often. Because how cool would it be if there was actually an entire reality out there, like the one in her mystery game? If those characters really existed? There's something in her that wants to pretend it's more than a party game, more than a cool mystery campaign.

In this universe, though, it's just that: A campaign she scribbled on paper cards. Hopefully, it will be an awesome one.

1929, Fictional Chicago

There was a noise in the hallway. Not a loud noise, and not familiar or clear to identify, either, but definitely there.

Darla looked around, over the rim of her desk and up and down the dark corridor. Her brown eyes were wide like a doe's, flying rapidly from one door to the other, briefly grazing each of the paintings that covered the old walls before finding the surface of her desk once again. She'd closed her book half an hour ago, not able to find her way back into the story as her thoughts had drifted off.

A finger running through her light brown curls, she sighed. The noise must have been from outside, the patients were fast asleep and would call for her if they needed help. No one was here, just herself and the empty silence once again ringing in the halls.

She hated it here.

Oh, how she hated it.

The last hospital Darla worked in was lovely! She'd work mostly day-shifts, and barely ever had to see more pain than a broken arm or a twisted hip could bring. Yes, people had died back home, too, of course - any hospital is sometimes a terribly sad place, after all. But most of those dying people back home had been old, or had been sick for a long time. Here in the big city, Darla had seen shot wounds and burned flesh, had seen alcohol poisoning and the results of extreme violence. Big cities had that much more strangeness to offer, didn't they? Especially this one, perhaps. Maybe it was just the utter size of the *Chicago Saint John's*, that made the amount of horrors Darla had come to see that much bigger and more terrifying, but for the first time in her three years as a fully trained nurse, she felt entirely incompetent again: Too slow, too inexperienced, too scared as to fit into the reality of her work life here. All the pain she saw was overwhelming, sometimes.

That's probably also why they put her here, behind a desk in the least crowded corridor of them all, night shift after night shift after night shift.

Darla couldn't really say that it bothered her, though. She'd take silence and uselessness over too much hurry and too much blood at any time. Her days would be spent with sleep and hours at home, her nights with romance novels, letters she wrote to her father, with knitting and...

Well, with *him*.

He always came by around midnight, his hands in his pockets and a shy smile lighting up his features. And what features that were! Pale, freckled skin stretched over high cheekbones, his lips full and his eyes the warmest type of dark. His hair was a floppy, black mess, his nose probably just the right height to bump her own against if she'd stand on her tip toes right in front of him. And maybe, he'd even be able to kiss her in just the right angle, if he'd bow slightly down towards her at the same time. And if he ever did, Darla's heart would stop.

But he never would, of course, because you barely know each other!, she quickly reminded herself. And sometimes, when Henry came by and talked to her, leaning over her desk or sitting on a chair, close to her,

he'd smile in a way that was far too perfect to not have been noticed by anybody else, before. Henry was the nicest, kindest man she'd met in a long time (the kindest man she'd ever met, if she was being honest with herself, - which she wasn't), and there was just no way a man like that would not be taken already. There must be someone in his heart, Darla knew. And even if there wasn't, Darla would probably never bring up the courage to make her feelings about him clearer, herself, and that tiny chance of him being lost to her for such a silly reason was surely what Darla feared and despaired the most about all of this.

But Darla loved the talks with Henry, anyway. Who couldn't? He's been working here for just a couple of months now, and while she'd barely seen him all that much, at first, she'd quickly noticed how often he was working at night, as soon as the many night shifts started for her, too. Which was *wonderful*. Henry enjoyed the silence of the hospital at this time, he said, and he didn't seem to think Darla failed as a nurse just because she couldn't yet live up to the fast pacing of her new workplace. „I'm from a small town, too, you know?”, he once told her, smiling gently and understandingly as he heard about her struggles with the job here in Chicago. „It can be kind of nice to have things be *boring* sometimes, right? I mean, after the not so nice stuff... It can be good to get away from it all once in a while.”

He'd chuckled, then, scratching his neck, and while she wasn't entirely sure what Henry meant by that, she smiled back at him, warmly. „That's true, Mister, that's very true. Small towns are nice.”

Darla also kept smiling back at him when he told her about his night, yesterday— about the stacks of cricket magazines someone kept hiding in the supply closet on first floor, or about that *strange* mustard smell that apparently haunts the emergency ward, and about the flower he saw lying around on second floor, all forgotten in some hallway.

„It must have fallen out of a bouquet!”, Darla had said, eyeing the yellow tulip in his outstretched hand with fascination. „Aren't these tulips absurdly expensive, at the moment?”

Henry had smiled, a hint of a blush creeping up his perfect jawline, for some reason. „Well, perhaps, Madam, but I'm sure it was meant

for you to have it."

She almost gasped softly as he had held it out for her, looking like he so clearly wanted her to reach for it and meet him in the middle.

„I can't take that.", she'd laughed, nervously shaking her head against the mere possibility. „It might be missed."

„Not as much as it would be if someone stepped on it tomorrow morning. Do you really want me to put it back on the dirty floor? Because I'd much rather see you keep it!"

He'd seemed so eager in his hopefulness, so sincere... It almost didn't feel like a casual gesture between acquaintances or even friends, and much more like well-planned intimacy.

Don't fool yourself, Darla!, she quickly had to think. *A gentleman will always find ways to make the people around him feel special. Everyone, not only those closest to him.* Which you're definitely not among.

With all that contemplation in the back of her head, and the warm spark in the warmest, warmest, warmest of dark eyes, Darla had finally reached for the flower, trying to calm her heart-filled beam into a more moderate smile. She failed miserably at that task, though.

„Thank you, Sir.", she'd breathed, voice barely above a whisper, and was she imagining the way his shoulders shivered slightly, in response?

„Anytime, Darla.", he had answered, seeming so sure of that idea that it came out more as a promise than as a figure of speech. Maybe, in another world, there was a version of him constantly picking up flowers for her, anytime, and maybe his eyes were just as warm and dark and his voice just as soothing and exhilarating as this one. But what had caught her attention most, yesterday night, was his use of her first name, so filled with praise as if it was the biggest compliment in human existance. Had anyone else before ever said her name that way? Had *he* ever called her by her first name before, at all? Darla couldn't remember exactly, but she was pretty sure he had *never* called her 'Darla', before. She'd recognize the way it made her feel whole, like that. She'd remember this warm tingling across

her skin.

But she didn't remember it, so it must have been a premiere, yesterday.

She couldn't wait for more premieres with this friend of hers, with that very special friend who she so desperately wanted to call more than that... And maybe, someone else had forgotten a flower on the hospital floor, today, Darla thought with a quiet laugh. Maybe a daisy, this time?

Eleven 'o'clock came and went, and midnight got closer.

Darla couldn't wait for him to join her for another little while, like he did every night. All alone together on the quietest of all floors.

„Now, how much longer is this going to take, I'm asking you?”, groaned Walt Adams, frustrated with his friend. „I really need to be on second floor in half an hour!”

„Yes, yes, I heard you the first time!”, Jamie mumbled, still stuffing self-made confetti into a jute bag. He turned around to the other young man, a bright smile appearing beneath the curly hair and fancy cylinder. „Walt, my dearest, this show at the restaurant tonight is going to be just great.”, he stated, looking excited.

Walt rolled his eyes, wishing his good friend would never even have started with this peculiar hobby of his in the first place. It was rather embarrassing. Then again, there were probably worse things a person could try to impress others with than by doing magic tricks.

„Alright, alright, it will be great. Can you help me carry this upstairs, now?”, he asked, pointing at the heavy box of camera equipment in front of him. „There's some sort of celebrity currently meeting the hospital director on second floor, as far as I was told, and I'm supposed to take a picture of them together as soon as possible.”, he explained.

Jamie laughed, looking excited. „A celebrity, really?”

Walt shrugged. „Yes, these sorts of photos are exactly what Dr.

Malvick wants for his office, apparently. Everytime someone of influence is in the hospital for some reason, Dr. Malvick wants a picture with them. I'm also helping him with medical pictures for his upcoming book very often, though. He actually pays me quite well."

„That's really practical!”, Jamie replied, contemplatively, while taking off his current hat and swapping it against a less striking one. „I wasn't sure whether you'd land on your feet again, you know? You seemed really hopeless after you lost that newspaper job last year, I'm glad you got yourself a new work.”

He sounded so sincere that Walt raised an amused eyebrow at his friend. „Thanks, I assume I got lucky.”

Jamie picked one end of the box with the camera equipment off of the floor, waiting for his dark-skinned friend to take the other one, so they could carry the heavy box outside of his small basement office.

„Why so surprised? What, am I not allowed to say something nice, once in a while?”, complained the curly-haired man with a smirk. „I just meant, it's nice to see you around here so often, these days.”

Walt shuddered, involuntarily. „Yes, as long as I don't have to think about *your* job in here all that much, it's splendid, I'd say.”

Jamie rolled his eyes and kept slowly walking through the hallway while they carried the box, one last look at the morgue-door next to his office.

„You don't mind taking medical photographies, but you have a problem with me examining dead people? That seems strange.”

„Strange?!”, Walt exclaimed, shaking his head. He kicked the door towards the next corridor open with his foot, reluctantly realising that they'd have to take the stairs. There were no functioning elevators in this part of the building. „No, what's strange is that you feel fine doing that, Jamie! What an unpleasant job, yikes!”

Jamie just smiled. „I'm helping the police, the doctors, the patients' family members... There's always some questions, when people die, especially here! It's good to have someone like me around, is all I'm

saying."

Walt snorted and shook his head. It was a discussion they'd often had before already, but then again the two of them liked to get into discussions with one another. It was more of a good time when they disagreed on things, it almost seemed. As different as their jobs and lives might have been though, one thing both gentlemen had in common: Their fancy for dancing the Charleston!

Every Saturday or Sunday night, Jamie and Walt would dress up and enter their favorite dance hall together. When the two of them entered the floor with their handsome hats and nice canes, some nights, several of the young ladies who'd watch them almost swooned.

„Good morning, Eddie!”, Jamie greeted someone, as he and Walt finally reached the second floor of the hospital, the heavy box within their hands making the two men breathe hard with exhaustion.

Another gentleman of about their age turned around, and Walt noticed the friendly, boyish features of the doctor. He wore his dark blond hair in a fashionable short cut, his forehead being very exposed by how well he'd kempt it back. He knew how much time Jamie often spend in order to achieve such a style, but his messy curls were just not as appropriate for this particular maneuver.

„Hello, Jamie! What a pleasure to meet you up here again.”, the doctor replied, giving both him and Walt a curious smile as he noticed the giant, wooden box in their hands. „What's that, should I help you carry, maybe?”, he offered, out of the blue, and stopped leaning against the nurses' counter in order to step closer towards the two of them. Walt raised an eyebrow at this. It was rather surprising how polite this doctor was being, his smile being genuine, his soft voice almost shy. Most doctors Walt had met during the short time he'd worked in this hospital had been rather arrogant, in his opinion. This one seemed different, though, quite likeable.

„Oh, don't worry, Ed, we've got this.”, Jamie shrugged, and gave his acquaintance a smile. „Well then, see you on Friday, I'd say!”

„Of course, Friday, I almost forgot!”, the man replied, reciprocating the smile. „Well, then, good day!”

„To you too, Sir!"

As Walt and Jamie turned around the next corner with all their camera equipment, Walt frowned. „How do you know this doctor? He seems... unusually nice."

Jamie grinned. „Oh, yes, he's quite a good company! Eddie was the one I showed my first magic trick to, you know? He's also the guy who lends me the fabulous cylinder I showed you, the one for my show tomorrow. He's a big collector of hats, he says."

„Hm. If he likes them so much, then it's certainly nice that he's borrowing you one. And what was that thing you two said about Friday? Is he coming to another one of your magic shows, too?"

„What? Oh, no, that was just a remark about a dinner party that we both got invited to.", Jamie explained, wiping beads of sweat off of his forehead. Only a couple more steps, and they'd be able to finally set the heavy weight down.

„A dinner party?", Walt wondered, surprised. „You don't mean Dr. Malvick's dinner party this Friday, by any chance?"

His friend's eyes were wide, a smile spreading on his features. „No way! You're invited, too?"

Walt beamed, chuckling. „Er, yeah, that's what I just said, isn't it? The better question is, why are *you* invited? I always thought you barely knew him? And who invites a *coroner* to their fancy dinner party, anyway?"

„Someone who wants to get into the pleasure of seeing me perform my magic tricks for them, perhaps?", Jamie offered, wiggling his eyebrows funny. „I bet everyone talks about me! The entire hospital staff would probably love to see one of my magical spectacles, at this point!"

Walt rolled his eyes, not believing a word. „Whatever you say, my friend. Whatever you say."

So, there he was, strolling the empty floors of one of the creepiest

places he'd ever seen, a flashlight in one hand, a broom in the other. *Disguise is everything*, the distracted part of his brain whispered, sarcastically. Right, as if anyone could honestly call Henry's meager attempts of a disguise effective, but no one had yet called him out on anything, so things could be worse... Maybe he *did* give a good impression of a janitor, after all, in spite of the wary look in his eyes, the constantly searching gaze.

Room 214 was locked tonight, but it didn't take long for him to change that. Document after document reached his fingers, but nowhere did he read anything of importance. Maybe next time, he thought with a sigh, as he pulled the door closed behind him, knowing very well that it was a lie. These pages weren't helpful at all, but he had to at least try, and so he kept searching through them for a couple of minutes every night.

Then there was room 117, the room where the nurses stored the majority of the bed linen. It seemed just as pointless to look in here, but his boss was getting impatient, so Henry was starting to grasp at straws. The tiny hospital library was just as little of a lead, as usual.

He kept searching. A few private offices, from several of the doctors working here, were looking just as tidy and relatively empty as always, except for Dr. Karinowa's office, of course. Dr. Karinowa was a 65-year old pediatrician, and to this date the only female doctor of the hospital. She kept putting new potted plants in there whenever the old ones had died- which seemed to happen to her almost on a weekly basis. Henry chuckled, shaking his head. Part of him wanted to leave a little note behind on her desk all the time, advising her to stop buying new plants in the first place when she so clearly didn't have a green thumb, but of course he couldn't do that, and of course it was also kind of nice to see how the old lady's optimism in this area apparently never ended.

Henry kept walking. Almost half past eleven, and then almost twelve.

The lights that shined in these old hospital floors were dimmed and blue-ish, making everything seem all the more strange, but Henry had gotten used to it at this point.

And then, finally, it was midnight.

And he got to see her.

„Darla, hey!”, he breathed, hoping to sound less excited than he felt, as he walked across the dark corridor on eleventh floor, towards her desk. He tried to silently clear his throat, it had gotten all rough and scratchy from the hours of silence, but judging from the beautiful smile on her face, she didn't seem to mind all that much. „Good evening, Henry.”, she greeted him, silently, her hazel eyes all sparkly in the half-lit room.

„I've got your coffee.”, she explained, pointing at the steaming can next to her.

„And I've got your sugar.”, he grinned, pulling out the small jar he brought with him, every night. Her smile couldn't have been sweeter if she tried. He walked around the counter and dropped down in the chair next to her, inconspicuously trying to get closer to hers.

It was this ritual they had started, a couple of weeks back, after she'd mentioned how someone kept stealing the sugar pot from the nurses office, making the night shifts all the more exhausting. Night shifts just weren't the same without coffee.

He had raised an eyebrow at her, wondering why she didn't just drink her coffee black, and Darla had looked so adorably confused and incredulous that he'd had to laugh out loud.

„Coffee without sugar? Isn't that a complete waste of water?”, she'd stated, her lips twitching, but her eyes all serious.

„Not if it keeps you awake, I think!”, he'd laughed.

„Oh? I thought that was your job.”, she'd dead-panned, before smiling almost flirtatiously, and he'd felt his cheeks go red in a way that probably not even the low, artificial lights above them could hide. It was strange how someone mostly so shy could turn Henry into a stuttering, incoherent mess sometimes. He usually wasn't like this. He was a professional, a fighter, even. But with her? Nothing but sugar.

After that night, there had been a few comments for a couple of days,- him teasing her every now and then about how tired she

looked and how she should just give in and drink some coffee, with sugar or without. But she'd shaken her head, pretty brown curls dancing around with the movement, and she'd reminded him again on her strong opinion on unsweetened coffee.

(„It tastes terrible, even with milk! Worse than most medicines, I bet!"

A laugh from Mike. „Alright, alright, I'll stop mentioning it."

But he didn't, of course.)

Then, one night, he'd brought that tiny jar of sugar with him, almost melting at the sight of her surprised, pleased expression. It was just some sugar, not anything special, and yet Darla seemed awfully grateful at the gesture.

So they'd shared the coffee, and the sugar, and from that night on every night was filled with those tiny coffee breaks for the two of them. It was the best.

„Doesn't it ever get boring?", she'd wondered, one night, „To scrub the floors and clean the windows and all that, night after night?"

Before he could answer, her curious expression quickly morphed into an embarrassed one. „I- I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I didn't mean to sound rude, I.."

„No, no!", he quickly assured her, „It's fine, don't worry!" He'd chuckled, looking at his half-filled cup. „I mean, yes, of course it's kind of boring. Cleaning, and... so on. But it's alright, I like spending time alone.", he vaguely stated, which was true, of course: Both for his fake-job, as well as his actual one. „Also, I like spending time with you, so that's a plus."

They both blushed furiously, as the words left his mouth, and the silence that followed was kind of awkward.

(But he was a grown man, damn it. He should really stop acting like a fourteen-year old, right?)

Clearing his throat, Henry went on. „Anyway, doesn't... this get

boring, too? It seems like there's not much nursing to do at night, at least not on this floor. Or is there?"

She sighed, her eyes cast towards the legs of her small metal chair.
„Yes, that's true. I should probably be glad, though."

He furrowed his brow. „Huh? Why's that?"

Darla met his eyes, once again making him feel like something clicked into place.

„Turns out that hospitals in the big city are pretty different from the ones in small towns, I think. It's all still quite new for me.", she murmured, softly.

Henry frowned again. „You don't like it here?"

The thought was a bitter one. She seemed so caring, the way she talked about the patients... Was she not allowed to really do that, here? Was she not fast enough, scared of all the hurry and all the extremes this building held, maybe?

Darla shook her head, smiling half-heartedly. „I do like some of it.", she stated, talking about her life and her job here in Chicago once again, and shooting Henry a careful look.

Did she mean...?

(*Calm down, Henry. Private investigators don't jump to conclusions, do they? No reason to grin like a fool right now. Stop it!*)

„That's...That's good.", he answered, dumbly, and her teeth grazed her lip in a way that seemed to trap an almost upcoming laugh, maybe.

It was also really pretty, and kind of distracting, and, now that he thought about it, *very* distracting.

But any further potential laughter would have to take place another night, as Henry quickly realised when he noticed the time on his pocket watch.

„Looks like I should better get going, actually.“, he said, unhappily.

„Still quite a lot to do.“

„Probably.“, she agreed, knowing perhaps that he'd spend more than twice the time he was supposed to on his coffee break tonight.

„Goodnight, Darla.“, he said, gently touching her arm in a way that hopefully didn't seem too forward.

„Night, Henry.“, she smiled, warm eyes following him across the room as he left.

Outside in the next hallway, he sighed and wished he could have stayed longer.

But he had something to accomplish, and there'd be another meeting with her tomorrow night.

He really couldn't wait.

„So, what's it like?“, the friendly doctor asked, as he checked her pulse for what must have been the fifth or sixth time, already. „To be a famous actress must be so exciting, I assume.“

„It does have its perks, that's true.“, the red-haired beauty replied, cheekily. She thought about all the amazing things she'd gotten to buy, ever since she'd first starred in several silent movies, about three years ago. She'd travelled the world quite a lot, too, and no amount of bravado could ever fully describe just how many delicious meals she'd been invited to, over the many months in fame. It was a fabulous, fantastic life she'd accomplished, even if the road leading to this point had been one paved with hard, restless work.

Melanie shook her head, focusing on their conversation again. „But it must also be very interesting to work as a surgeon, right? It seems like it's something so rare!“

The young man chuckled, a strand of his dark blond hair falling out of place momentarily. „Rarer than to be a movie star? I don't know about that.“

Mel rolled her eyes, a little frustrated with the man's modesty. He'd surely earned his place in life just like she had hers, perhaps even more so!

„Definitely rarer than most *good* movie stars, I'll tell you that.", she answered, drily. „Believe me, not everyone in this industry is as fantastic as me.", she stated, with the false sense of pride that she so often enjoyed to use as part of her humor, and the doctor seemed to notice that right away. He laughed when she pursed her lips, overacting the gesture on purpose. And when he made a few remarks in some papers on his desk, she saw that he was still smiling from her joke.

„So, it looks like everything should be alright again tomorrow.", Doctor Millers then said, sitting back down on the metal hospital chair close to hers. „Just better try to get some rest, Maam, and no more climbing around in trees until your wrist doesn't hurt any longer, alright?"

Mel gave him an annoyed stare, huffing at this.

„What was I supposed to be doing? My dog sat in our oak tree and didn't know how to get back down, I had to do something, surely. If I'd known how slippery the branches were, I'd have used a ladder instead!"

Dr. Millers seemed to suppress a smile at her explanation.

„A dog?", he asked, amusedly, „Aren't it usually *cats* that get themselves into that sort of issue?"

Mel shrugged, smiling again. „Well, Sir, this time it was a dog, I'd say. What, you think I can't recognize my own pet anymore?"

The man chuckled. „That's not what I meant!", he assured her, and almost seemed genuinely embarrassed now. He stood up, shaking his head.

„Well, it was a pleasure to meet you, maam.", he said, friendly, shaking her hand. „Am I going to have the pleasure to see you again on Friday, for Doctor Malvick's dinner party?", he wondered, looking

curious.

Mel frowned. „A dinner party? I hadn't been invited to one, no."

Dr. Millers' eyebrows raised at that. „What, didn't he ask you yet when he met you, earlier? Usually, whenever the good man holds a party, he wants people of your importance to come as well, if possible! He'd surely be honored to have you come, too!"

„Well, perhaps I should talk to him, then.", Mel grinned, finding the prospect of a fancy dinner party with such nice company quite good. It had been a few weeks since she'd last dined out, wearing bright lipstick, and all of that fun. „I'm sure if I mention to have heard about the party, he won't say no to me joining in!"

She laughed, and so did Dr. Millers.

„I'll have you know whether my wrist stopped hurting then, on Friday.", she informed him, waving the nice new acquaintance goodbye.

Yes, Mel pondered, as she walked through the hospital floors, curious glances following her everywhere, it would definitely be nice to get herself a dinner party invitation for this weekend!

„So... I was thinking...", he started, voice low and thoughtful, his eyes aimed at the desk in front of her. He was leaning over it, his eyes almost disappearing under his dark hair. And pretty.

„Yes?"

Henry looked back up, still rather unsure, but somehow his mouth was producing words now. „I was thinking... would you maybe... want to go to a dinner thing, on Friday?"

Darla's heart stopped, hoping against hope that he was asking what she thought he might be asking...

„A dinner thing?"

„Yes, like, a dinner party... with people from the hospital and... well,

and with me. I kind of thought..."

He licked his lips, anxiously picking at a loose thread on his sleeve. He often looked down at the sleeves and pants of his janitor's uniform like he found it hideous, but Darla couldn't help but find him dashing in probably anything. Not that she'd ever seen him outside of his janitor's clothes, of course. And now she found herself fighting hard against the blush that was threatening to take over, because of the way she'd phrased that thought...

Now would be a very bad time to get all flustered, Darla, stop it!

He took a deep breath.

„I kind of thought you'd like to be my dinner company? There's going to be a bunch of people there, it's at Professor Malwick's house... But I'd like to have you come, too, because it's not going to be a normal dinner party, either. I'd really like you to be there. Especially if you... erm, if you happened to have time, then?" He looked at her, expectantly.

„Only if you'd want to!" He quickly made clear, his eyes wide and his voice more nervous than what she's used to. It was wonderful.

Darla smiled, a wide, giant, probably too toothy looking smile that was reserved for moments like this, even if she'd later worry that she'd come off as too eager, perhaps... But if it kept *his* worries at bay, that would probably be worth it, she considered.

„I *would* want to come.", she replied, softly breathing out and feeling warm and trembling within the cold darkness of the big hallway. „I promise."

(Back to Hawkins, 1985)

Friday rolls around, and everyone feels excited.

Dustin must have practised his favourite card- and coin tricks about a hundred times, at this point.

Will feels like he's found the ultimate costume, the drawings in his

room helping him get into character, - sort of.

Lucas received some background info on vintage cameras from Jonathan, and that is definitely going to pay off.

Mike just hopes he won't make a complete fool out of himself in front of a very enthusiastic El.

And Max?

Max, with her mindblowingly awesome movie-star outfit, patiently waits for each of her friends to ring her door bell, that Friday. Billy and her parents are all out, tonight- thank god- and there's nothing stopping them from living right in the golden twenties, for one evening.

And with a wide, bright grin, watching from the corner of their living room, Max takes in all of her friend's surprised expressions, when the door opens and they are greeted by Professor Malvick, dinner party host and hospital director.

In other words, they are greeted by Steve.

(To be continued.)